

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Wise Feedback

& The Mentor's Dilemma.

### The Mentor Mindset

High Standards AND High Support.

### Transparency

& The Five Practices.

### Stress

What do YOU believe?

### A Micro-Moment

Of Life-Changing Encouragement.

*"Our society tends to think that there are only two ways to interact with young people: tough or soft, mean or nice, authoritarian or permissive. We don't realize that you can have a bit of both: you can have high standards and high support."*

~ David Yeager, PhD

## 10 to 25

### The Science of Motivating Young People

BY DAVID YEAGER, PHD · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2024 · 464 PAGES

"It seems like everywhere you turn, you hear older adults—Gen Xers, millennials, and boomers—describing young people today in dark and despairing terms. In my eighteen years as a developmental scientist, and thirteen years as a parent, I've heard it in the bleachers at my kids' games, in the boardrooms of major corporations I've consulted for, and by the watercolors at schools I've visited. They just don't care. They speak a different language. They're entitled. They're too sensitive. But imagine a world in which older adults interact with young people, aged ten to twenty-five, in ways that reliably leave the next generation feeling inspired, enthusiastic, and ready to contribute—rather than disengaged, outraged, worried, or overwhelmed.

In this world, managers' work will be easier because their younger employees will be motivated and self-sufficient. Parents will be happier because they won't have to dread their children turning into teenagers. Educators will feel more successful and less burned-out because they can reach a stressed-out or disengaged generation of young people. And all the rest of us will be able to bridge the divide between the generations with confidence without starting a war of words.

I've seen this world in the lives of great managers, parents, educators, and coaches. I've studied what they do and how they talk. I've used the scientific method—hypothesis, experiment, data, results—to understand why they're effective. I wrote this book because I want to share the secrets I've learned. This book is for anyone who wants to experience this better world firsthand in their interactions with young people aged ten to twenty-five. It shows how to stop clashing with the next generation and start inspiring them."

~ David Yeager, PhD from *10 to 25*

I got this book after one of our big Heroic investors (who also happens to be an elite performance coach for world-class athletes and the next generation of elite athletes) sent me a text telling me it was incredible. (Thanks, Chase!)

I immediately got it. It was waiting for me when I got back from a just-the-boys weekend chess tournament with Emerson. I immediately started reading it as I \*knew\* it would be a GREAT resource for all the parents AND grandparents and teachers and coaches and CEOs we're blessed to serve as we strive to raise the next generation of heroes. It's FANTASTIC. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I've often said that my two favorite "parenting" books are [Carol Dweck's \*Mindset\*](#) and [Self-Theories](#). She says: "This book will change millions of lives. Whether you're a teacher, parent, or manager, it's hard to understand young people—what they want, what will help them flourish, and what will make your life with them rewarding. Superstar researcher David Yeager provides answers that have been validated by both scientific studies and real-world experts. This is one of the most fascinating and important books of the past decade."

*"Status and respect are to a young person what food and sleep are to a baby—core needs that, when satisfied, can unlock better motivation and behavior."*

~ David Yeager, PhD

As per the back flap of the book: "David Yeager, PhD, is a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and a cofounder of the Texas Behavioral Science and Policy Institute. His research has been featured everywhere from The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal to Scientific American, CNN, Fox News, and The Atlantic.

Yeager is the only developmental scientist to have won all three of the major awards for early career contributions to developmental psychology, and the only one to have won 'best paper' awards in four different fields: behavioral science, social psychology, developmental psychology, and education. He got his PhD and MA at Stanford University and his BA and MEd at the University of Notre Dame." (Go Fighting Irish!)

In other words, he's one of THE most respected developmental and social psychologists in the world. The book is PACKED with Big Ideas and we're barely going to scratch the surface of its wisdom. Let's get straight to work!

## THE MENTOR'S DILEMMA & WISE FEEDBACK

"In 2014 I published a scientific experiment with Geoffrey Cohen (and others) on a simple but effective solution to the mentor's dilemma. We called it *wise feedback*. We had instructors be critical with their feedback but accompany that criticism with a clear and transparent statement about the reason they were giving that feedback—namely that they believed the student could meet a high standard if they got the right support. So-called wise feedback is wise (or attuned) to the predicament of young people who don't want to be held to an impossible standard and who also don't want to be talked down to.

We tested wise feedback in an experiment with middle school students in social studies classrooms. The seventh-grade students wrote first drafts of five-paragraph essays about their personal heroes. Next, teachers covered the essays with critical comments and suggestions: *You need to put a comma here. Explain this idea further. Rearrange that sentence.* Before the students got the essays, though, the research team attached handwritten notes from the teachers—either a treatment note or a control note. (Teachers wrote the notes, but they didn't know which student got which note or what the study was trying to test.)

Half the students, randomly assigned, got the treatment note with the wise feedback, which said, *I'm giving you these comments because I have very high standards and I know that you can reach them.* The other half of the students got a vague control-group note. *I'm giving you these comments so that you'll have feedback on your essay.* That note conveyed no clear reason for the feedback. ...

We were hoping that the wise feedback would motivate students in the treatment group to work harder on their revisions. But even we were surprised by how strongly they responded. When students received the wise-feedback note, they were twice as likely to revise their essays: 40 percent of the students in the control group revised their essays, but 80 percent did in the treatment group."

That's from page 5 of the Introduction. It captures the thesis and practical wisdom of the book.

Right before that study, David tells us about what he describes as the "mentor's dilemma."

He tells us that "it's very hard to simultaneously criticize someone's work and motivate them because criticism can crush a young person's confidence. It's a dilemma because leaders feel like they're stuck between two bad choices. They could either put up with poor performance (but be nice) or demand high performance (but be cruel). Neither option is ideal. All too often, both sides—younger and older—tend to leave these interactions frustrated or offended, even though both sides might have entered the interaction with growth in mind."

So... Back to the *wise feedback* study.

*"The Maori tribe in New Zealand has a beautiful term for it: whakamana, which means 'to give prestige to, give authority to, confirm, enable, authorize, legitimize, empower, validate.' (Mana means 'power,' and whaka means 'to give.') Whakamana is what leaders need to do to resolve the adolescent predicament and satisfy young people's sensitivity to status and respect."*

~ David Yeager, PhD

*"By giving young people the thrilling opportunity to earn prestige and satisfy their needs for status and respect—mentor-mindset leaders offer them the chance to feel amazing. Young people soon learn that if they want to keep feeling that way (and avoid feeling humiliated), they should follow the mentor-mindset leader. The enforcer- or protector-mindset leaders, by shaming, blaming, judging, evaluating, and controlling young people, deny the opportunity to earn prestige. That's demotivating. The result is what Rosalie Wax saw on the reservation: passive or active teen rebellion."*

~ David Yeager, PhD

*"A [person] who becomes conscious of the responsibility [they] bear toward a human being who affectionately waits for [them], or to an unfinished work . . . knows the 'why' for [their] existence and will be able to bear almost any 'how.'"*

~ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946)

To quickly recap: Randomly assign middle schoolers into two groups. Have them write a first draft of a five-paragraph essay on one of their favorite heroes. (Awesome.) Then give them feedback on their essay. HALF of them get a note that says "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high standards and I know that you can reach them" while the \*other\* half gets a note saying "I'm giving you these comments so that you'll have feedback on your essay."

What happens? TWICE as many kids in the "wise feedback" group work hard to get better.

As David says: "Here's the takeaway: When you hold young people to high standards and make it clear that you believe they can meet these standards, you are respecting them because you are taking them seriously. Young people rise to meet the challenge because being respected is motivating. Further, you lift up all students and see greater equity."

P.S. Another big fan of the book is [Angela Duckworth](#). In *Grit*, she tells us about "wise parenting." Same basic idea. The short story? Wise Parents are BOTH warm AND demanding. They have high standards AND total support. On the other hand, what Angela calls Authoritarian Parents have high standards but low warmth. Permissive Parents have high warmth but low standards. Neglectful have neither.

## THE MENTOR MINDSET

"Through years of observing and interviewing these leaders, I discovered what distinguished them from their less-successful colleagues: their mentor mindsets. This mindset is consistent with the lesson of the wise-feedback note, of course, but it is also more profound and nuanced. I called it a mindset because it was a worldview and suite of behaviors. It went beyond simple statements and included concrete actions. What's more, these mentor-mindset leaders were far more effective than peers who used enforcer or protector mindsets.

The simplest way to understand these mindsets—enforcer, protector, and mentor—is to examine the framework presented in figure 2.1. The first thing to notice is that there isn't just one axis—rigor—that organizes leaders' approaches with young people. It's not the case that we can only be low-rigor pushovers (i.e., the protector) or high-rigor dictators (i.e., the enforcer). In fact, there are *two* axes. You can have high standards *and* high support. You can be a mentor.

Think of two perpendicular dimensions. ... One is standards (i.e., rigor or expectations) and the other is support (social, emotional, or material). High standards, low support: that's the *enforcer mindset*. High support, low standards: that's the *protector mindset*. High standards, high support: that's the *mentor mindset*. (There's a fourth quadrant in the bottom left, the *apathetic mindset*. These checked-out people tend to end up in either the enforcer or protector quadrants when they reengage anyway, so there isn't much use in describing them.)"

After David walks us through "What We Get Wrong" about our relationships with the younger generation in chapter #1, in chapter #2 he walks us through how to get it right.

While the wise feedback is a great standalone idea, the MENTOR MINDSET is a great lifetime leadership practice.

To recap... When we have high standards but low support, we are in the *enforcer mindset*. When we have low standards and high support, we're in the *protector mindset*. When we have BOTH high standards AND high support, we are in the *mentor mindset*.

THAT's where we want to play.

As David tells us: "Enforcers can build on their high standards by adding more support. Protectors can build on their care and concern by adding higher standards. Both are half-right, and so both just need to add one element to get it all the way right."

Here are some quick ideas on how to go about doing that...

*"Dobson called this solution a transparency statement: a simple and clear declaration of your intentions at the start of any potentially threatening interaction."*

~ David Yeager, PhD

*"I shall only ask him, and not teach him, and he shall share the enquiry with me."*

~ Socrates in Plato's *Meno*

## TRANSPARENCY

"You've got a mentor mindset. You maintain high standards. You're supportive. But do the young people in your life know it? If they don't understand how your leadership can help unlock their potential, then your actions won't motivate them nearly as much as they could. Transparency about mentor-mindset actions makes a difference, and anyone can start being transparent right away. You simply explain what you're doing and why."

That's from the first chapter in Section II which is all about "Mentor-Mindset Practices." After we get the Theory on the power of the Mentor Mindset, it's time to move to Practice. David gives us FIVE core practices—each of which gets its own chapter:

1. **Transparency.** You need to EXPLICITLY TELL the kids you parent/young adults you lead what your intentions are. For example: *"I'm REALLY committed to helping you activate your potential—which I think is extraordinary. To crush it together, I'm going to hold you to high standards of excellence AND I'm going to help you hit those standards. Let's go!"*
2. **Questioning.** TELL less and ASK more. David says: *"Asking questions—particularly ones that launch us into joint problem-solving, collaborative-troubleshooting mode—can show young people that we need to work together to understand the mismatch of priorities."*
3. **Stress.** We're going to focus on this in the next Idea. Time to eat stress like an energy bar. :)
4. **Purpose.** David worked with [William Damon](#) AND [Carol Dweck](#) at Stanford. (Lucky guy!) Helping the 10- to 25-year-olds we lead MAKE THE CONNECTION between what they're doing NOW and WHY they're doing it (both for their own benefit and for something bigger than themselves!) is super important.
5. **Belonging.** David walks us through the new science of belonging. It's POWERFUL. He also walks us through the science of bullying. It's FASCINATING. For now, know this: *"We secure our sense of belonging through experiences of looking competent in front of the people whose opinions we care about—earned prestige."* <- We need to help our 10 to 25's create this "earned prestige" via high standards and high support as wise mentors.

Now let's talk about Stress...

## STRESS: YOUR BELIEFS?

"Contemporary Western culture has tended to give people problematic beliefs about stress. Stanford University psychologist Dr. Alia Crum, a key architect of the scientific revolution in the study of stress, calls it the *stress-is-debilitating* belief. This is the belief that stress inevitably harms our performance and health. That belief in turn leads to the conclusion that we should avoid stress whenever possible.

Often, the *stress-is-debilitating* belief leads us to a protector mindset. If someone we care about is experiencing stress and we believe stress is bad, then it makes sense to encourage them to take action to reduce their stress (e.g., scaling back ambitions). Or we intervene to protect them from stress (e.g., taking away their responsibilities). ...

Other times, the *stress-is-debilitating* belief can make us enforcers. We say or think something like, *I know that what you're doing is very stressful, but you need to be gritty and power through it [or give up] because I can't do anything to help you.* Stress is either a bad thing to avoid or a bad thing that one must suffer through alone.

Crum's work has shown that our culture's *stress-is-debilitating* belief is both untrue and unhelpful. It's untrue because stress is often the natural by-product of us choosing to do something that is hard that's important to us. ...

*"The mentor mindset transformed the lives of all young people and especially those who were marginalized by their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status."*

~ David Yeager, PhD

*"If young people's brains seek social rewards—status, respect, prestige—and hope to avoid social failures—shame, humiliation, rejection—then we can turn these motivations into assets, not liabilities, for healthy development."*

~ David Yeager, PhD

The *stress-is-debilitating* belief is unhelpful because when we believe that stress is debilitating, and then we notice our stress, we feel even more worried. We may think, *What is wrong with me that I am the kind of person who gets stressed?* We stress about being stressed.

What ideas can replace our culture's *stress-is-debilitating* belief? Crum has proposed a *stress-can-be-enhancing* belief. With this belief, stress can serve as a source of energy to fuel improved performance. With that belief, you can encourage people to lean into their stress—to use it as an asset. You're not lowering standards. You're just helping them see how their body's stress can act as a resource to help them meet the higher standard.

When we teach a *stress-can-be-enhancing* belief, it can convince young people to see some forms of stress as a positive resource. What's more, when we emphasize that stress can be enhancing, *and it actually helps them do well*, then they remember it. This mentor-mindset approach to stress—embracing stress, rather than running from it or getting crushed by it—helps impart a nugget of wisdom that reinforces resilience in the long run."

STRESS. Viewed properly, it does a Hero good.

Unfortunately, as David tells us, too many of us these days have what Dr. Alia Crum calls a "stress-is-debilitating" view of stress. When we hold *that* perspective, we LITERALLY change our underlying biology for the worse—our cortisol goes up while our testosterone goes down.

We want to master this wisdom so we can help young people we mentor adopt a "stress-can-be-enhancing" mindset. We need to help them see that we can use stress as FUEL for our growth.

The book is PACKED with goodness. But, this is my favorite chapter. We talk about parallel wisdom in our Notes on [Kelly McGonigal's \*The Upside of Stress\*](#)—which is basically a book-length overview of the same research. Check out those Notes for more.

For now, I want to share a couple of blurbs David used in one of the studies he shares that helped people transform their mindset around stress. He focused on two different messages:

**Growth-Mindset Messaging:** *"When you're faced with difficult challenges and you keep trying until you get better, your brain grows new connections and becomes better at taking on new challenges in the future. ... When something does feel really difficult, your brain learns how to respond more effectively to that challenge. It's a lot like the way rigorous exercise makes your muscles really sore at first but, with training, your muscles don't just get stronger, they also recover more quickly when you push them to their limit."*

**Stress-Can-Be-Enhancing Messaging:** *"People often mistake their body's stress response for a sign that they're in a situation they can't handle. It's easy to do—racing heart, fast breathing, sweating—these are also ways our bodies respond in emergencies, when we're in real trouble. This is a mistake that actually can cause you to perform worse because, if you think your stress response is a problem, you're more likely to be worried about it and get distracted from performing. ... You can use your body's stress response effectively next time you feel it kicking in while you're trying to perform or master something difficult. When you start to feel anxious, try to remind yourself that this is your body's way of helping you rise and meet the challenge you're facing. That should help you to spend less time worrying about the fact that you feel anxious. Then you can focus on what you're doing and let your body's stress response give you the extra boost you need."*

Of course, we talk about this ALL.THE.TIME. I LOVE the way David frames that.

## A MICRO-MOMENT OF LIFE-CHANGING ENCOURAGEMENT

"Dr. Daniel Lapsley is a professor of adolescent psychology at the University of Notre Dame. He grew up in Pittsburgh, where his father was a coal miner while his mother was a homemaker. He never thought about college because nobody in his family had ever been. One summer day

*"When we mentor for future growth, it's far better to give young people experiences that show them they are capable of meeting the high standard with the appropriate support, rather than offering them unfounded assurances of their abilities—or, worse, hiding the standards from them altogether."*

~ David Yeager, PhD

*"We are all better than we know. If only we can be brought to realize this we may never again be prepared to settle for anything else."*

~ Kurt Hahn

in 1965, just before he started seventh grade, Lapsley and his friends were hanging out at a gas station after playing basketball. Lapsley struck up a conversation with a college-aged guy who was waiting for his car to get fixed. Soon the topic turned to the Vietnam War. Lapsley was a reader, and he precociously defended President Johnson's domino theory of communism in the region and the United States' role in the war. The college guy argued the other side in earnest, a little surprised that Lapsley had done his research, but also encouraging him. He gave no hint of ridicule, sarcasm, or belittlement. When his car was ready, he turned to Lapsley and said, 'You are an extraordinarily bright kid. Have you thought about going to college?' Then, for reasons Lapsley still doesn't understand, he asked if Lapsley had read Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and said how much he would enjoy it—implying that Lapsley would be up for the challenging read. Lapsley was twelve. He can still remember the exhilarating pride—the earned prestige. 'I walked home as if striding mountains. Imagine this stranger urging me to go to college, wondering if I've read Dante.' This interaction offers a good example of what I mean when I say that earned prestige is motivating. Eventually Lapsley did indeed go to college, just like the stranger had recommended. And he never left. He earned his PhD and spent his entire adult life as a college professor; he now serves as a lead mentor in the university's program to support first-generation college students."

That's from a chapter in Section III which is all about "Building a Better Future."

The chapter that precedes it is an incredibly inspiring look at how we create "Inclusive Excellence" such that disadvantaged groups are best given the opportunity to do truly excellent work and flourish while making important contributions to their fields and communities. The main theme of that chapter and how we create inclusive excellence? The essence of the entire book: the mentor mindset featuring its hallmark of *high standards* AND *high support*.

Now... Right after that passage above, Yeager tells us that Lapsley said that *"the encounter with the stranger at the gas station looms larger than any teacher, larger than anything that happened in any school. The stranger at the gas station planted an idea, raised a possibility that had not occurred to me. ... He made me feel special, talented. ... This clear, vivid memory I have has never shaken. And I credit this encounter, this stranger, with setting me on the path that was unusual for kids in the steel town of my birth."*

I actually got emotional reading his story as I felt into my own upbringing AND an experience I had just last weekend. I nearly wept recounting the story with Alexandra a moment ago. I talk about it in this +1 called [The Gas Station Chat](#).

For now... Here's to doing the hard work to forge the strength for two so we can be the wise mentors the next generation needs. It's time to change the world. And there's no way we'll do it without YOU and YOUR 10- to 25-year-olds you mentor leading the way.

With LOVE and ARETÉ, I say... LET'S GO, HERO!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential*. He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](http://heroic.us).

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